A Woman's Touch:
Twin Ports 'welderettes' helped build original *Spar*

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI, WITH SELECT MATERIAL SOURCED FROM THE HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

When the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Spar* sailed into its new home port of Duluth earlier this spring, it followed a long-standing Coast Guard tradition of service and dedication to the safety and wellbeing of mariners in the Twin Ports and around the globe. This particular *Spar*, one of a series of buoy tenders built in 1999-2000 in Marinette, Wisconsin, is no stranger to search and rescue, seas larger than those Lake Superior can generate, and tending buoys. Its recent arrival in the Port of Duluth-Superior calls to mind the original *Spar* (WLB-403) built in Duluth in 1943.

Around the Twin Ports, multiple shipyards produced a variety of ships for government service during World War II. Notably, Duluth's Marine Iron and Shipbuilding built several classes of buoy tenders (Cactus, Mesquite, and Iris), known as the 180s (a reference to their length, in feet), for the Coast Guard. Following in the U.S. Light-House Service practice of naming them after trees, shrubs and flowers, the tenders were delivered in rapid succession. By the time the *Spar* was built as an Iris-class vessel, or Class-C vessel at Marine Iron and Shipbuilding, the process from keel-laying to commissioning had shrank from a 360-day average to 269 days. Statistics point to a building process averaging 192,018 man-hours of labor per vessel.

Spar, built at a cost of $866,000 (the inflation-adjusted equivalent of approximately $14.3 million today), was one of 39 original 180-foot seagoing buoy tenders constructed between 1941–1944. Each was built in Duluth (21 at Marine Iron and Shipbuilding, 17 at Zenith Dredge Company) except the USCGC *Ironwood*, which was built in Maryland. In all, Duluth's seven commercial shipyards produced 191 steel ships of varied styles with an estimated value of $200 million during World War II. Much of the steel used in this construction originated as iron ore from northeastern Minnesota, shipped from the Port of Duluth-Superior to steel mills on the lower Great Lakes.

According to a 1985 article from Roger Losey in the *Nor'Easter*, journal of the Lake Superior Maritime Museum Association, achieving this robust level of ship production required a new source of labor, with so many of the nation's men fighting abroad.

The Duluth shipyards, like industrial operations nationwide, began recruiting women to become welders, machinists and electricians. By the end of the war, Duluth's "welderettes" numbered 3,500 of the 14,000 persons laboring through the cold Minnesota winters to turn out

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ships for the war effort. The total number of civilian shipyard workers employed by Marine Iron and Zenith Dredge peaked at 1,200 and 1,500 respectively.

Thus, the U.S. Coast Guard 180s are historically significant not only as the first class of modern buoy tenders, and as part of an unprecedented military build-up, but also as milestones in labor history. American women helped build the 180s during the period when women first began to enter the nation's industrial workforce.

In breaking with the U.S. Light-House Service's flora-inspired naming tradition, the WLB-403 tender was christened in recognition of the U.S. Coast Guard Women's Reserve, called the SPARs (see explanation on page 9). *Spar* was commissioned on June 12, 1944, prior to assignment in Boston, Massachusetts. As a convoy escort during World War II, *Spar* conducted anti-submarine duty along the coast of Brazil. Following wartime service, she remained on the northeast coast, next homeported at Woods Hole, Massachusetts, in 1946, and Bristol, Rhode Island, in 1957.

In the late 1950s, as the Cold War intensified, a series of radar posts were developed along the Northwest Passage, named the DEW line. In support of the DEW line, the *Spar* was assigned to help "establish an escape route for radar-line supply ships which might become trapped in the Arctic by ice or war." The voyage began May 19, 1957, in Narragansett Bay, when the *Spar* departed for the Panama Canal Zone and the Pacific Northwest to rendezvous with the icebreaker *Storis* and tender *Bramble* to execute their mission.

Departing from Seattle on July 1, 1957, the three vessels traveled through Unimak Pass on their way to Point Barrow, Alaska, where they began their attempt to break through the historic Northwest Passage. Three months later, on Sept. 6, 1957, the *Spar* and its companion ships reached the eastern side of Bellot Strait where they were joined by the Canadian icebreaker HMCS *Labrador*. Lt. Charles V. Cowing, *Spar's* young skipper, had a moment to write a special entry into the vessel's log: "1320: Arrived eastern point Bellot Strait having completed transit of Bellot Strait and the Northwest Passage in company with the *Storis* (WAG-38) and *Bramble* (WLB-392), 109 days out of Bristol, Rhode Island."

On Sept. 12, 1957, the *Spar* crossed the Arctic Circle en route to its home base in Bristol. From Cowing's log: "The culmination of this assignment occurred when the Coast Guard Cutters *Storis*, *Bramble*, and *SPAR* became the first vessels to circumnavigate the North American continent. (U.S.) President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent his personal congratulations for this significant accomplishment."

Female shipbuilders in Duluth-Superior

The original *Spar*, WLB-403

Photos courtesy University of Wisconsin-Superior Jim Dan Hill Library

In 1966, *Spar* participated in a major oceanographic charting mission in the North Atlantic. Off the coast of Svalbard, Norway, *Spar* surveyed ocean topography, logging over 17,000 miles. During the expedition, *Spar* called on ports in Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Germany and Ireland before returning to its home base.

Following reassignment to Boston in April 1967, *Spar* moved to its last homeport in South Portland, Maine, in March 1973. In these later years, *Spar* went to Refresher Training in Little Creek, Virginia, beginning in 1981, where it "achieved the highest marks ever earned by an oceangoing buoy tender." In 1983, 1985, 1988, 1990, 1992 and 1995, *Spar* again returned from Little Creek with outstanding marks and proudly displayed a gold "E" with three gold stripes for nine consecutive overall "excellent" scores in operations and seamanship training. Because of this, *Spar* was recognized by Vice Admiral Paul Welling, Atlantic Area commander, as "the cutter with the most gold" in the Atlantic Fleet.

Following a half-century of work, *Spar* was decommissioned in 1997, and intentionally sunk as an artificial reef and dive site. The wreck is located about 40 miles south of Morehead City, North Carolina, in 100 feet of water.